

The Honorable Secretary of State
1500 11th Street, Fifth Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Comments on Voting System Hearing

Thank you for allowing us to make comments on the hearing provided by webcam on Monday, February 8. We hope these comments are helpful when making difficult decisions for the state of California.

The right to vote privately and independently is a right that was denied to blind Californians until just a few years ago. Many visually impaired Californians are still waiting to exercise this right to vote privately and independently in many city and county elections.

Some advocates, citing security concerns posed by the use of newer, electronic voting systems, have tried to discourage their implementation. This is unacceptable to California's blind citizens. Because modern, electronic voting machines provide spoken instructions and feedback, they allow blind people to vote privately and independently, something that no other voting method allows. We regard our right to a private, independent vote to be a non-negotiable right. People who can see would reject out of hand any voting system that would take away their right to a secret ballot, so how can anybody, in good conscience, deny the same right to their fellow citizens who happen to be blind? Voting security is important, so security procedures should be adopted that will provide both security and accessibility without disenfranchising any registered voters.

The California Council of the Blind has concerns about potential accessibility barriers and disenfranchisement in any all vote-by-mail system. We do not think the voting centers often proposed are a viable option for voters who are blind and visually impaired. Transportation is always an issue for those that cannot drive. Many with the most severe visual impairments do have paratransit but when limited voting centers are available, they often encounter long rides which most other voters don't have. Those that are limited to taking buses or trains have to worry about the distances to travel and the number of transfers needed if the only option is a long way away.

There are also many other problems with an all vote by mail environment. Those with no vision will not be able to read their ballot at all and would have to rely on a family member or paid reader, if available and affordable, to read their ballot. In a perfect world, this would not be an issue, but how will the voter know the right choices are marked? Those with low vision will not be able to read their ballots at the regular print size. The font type would need to be at the very least 18 point size with no italics and fancy type. Verdana or Arial are recommended fonts to use. Also, there are issues with tracking and making sure that one marks the ballot correctly. Because of tracking, the wrong candidate might be marked accidentally.

Voters with low vision did very well with the large print touch screens with the proper color contrast and were able to cast their votes independently. Voters with no useable vision successfully voted with the touch screen systems as well. All persons with visual impairments also did well with the talking voting systems used by Los Angeles County.

Of course, the final point to make is that it is unconstitutional to have vote by mail alone. Voters with visual impairment would not be able to have the right to a secret and private vote.

Sincerely,

Ardis Bazyn
California Council of the Blind Voting Issues Representative